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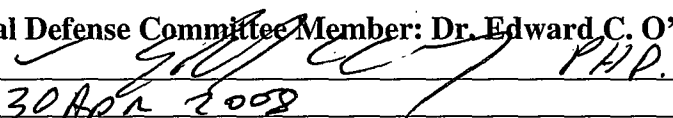
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The PLA's Combat Leadership System: Time for a Change?

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Thesis: China's political work system aims to influence, develop, and inspire the body, mind, and heart of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldier to accomplish the will of the Party. Based on the changing dynamics of war and the shifting social characteristics of the Chinese officer, the PLA's political work system must evolve, or experience a likely reduction in combat effectiveness.

Discussion: China's lack of major conventional combat experience on the modern battlefield makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the PLA's combat leadership. The commanders and officers leading the PLA today are unlike their combat-hardened, revolutionary predecessors. Instead, today's Chinese officers generally are more educated, prosperous, technologically advanced, and untested by hard combat experience.

In spite of these dynamic changes within the officer corps, the PLA's combat leadership system appears to have remained largely static. The basic elements of the PLA's combat leadership system are the leaders (cadre or officers), the soldiers, and the framework employed to govern the interaction between the two. The PLA's political work system provides the structure for its combat leadership capability. Historically the political work system was generally effective in harnessing combat power and promoting harmony within the ranks. The political work system satisfied the soldier's physical needs, engaged his mind through an intensive indoctrination process, and influenced his heart by promoting strong comradely relations. This study examines whether China's traditional leadership system will support and motivate the PLA's contemporary officer and his soldiers on future battlefields.

Conclusion: It is time for the PLA's political work system to change, however it is uncertain whether the PLA's leadership recognizes the need for change and is willing to do anything about it. In the end, the PLA cannot save a political work system that is out-of-sync with the demands of "informationized" soldiers and the dynamic economic and social environment of modern China. "PLA watchers" should balance their attention to hardware (i.e., weapons systems) advances with the more important effort of understanding the software (i.e., people and leadership) changes the PLA is experiencing. Commanders and soldiers win wars, not weapons systems. Understanding the Chinese commander and how he will motivate, lead, and inspire his soldiers in combat is vital. To ignore the PLA's combat leadership system is perilous.

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Preface

There are volumes of books, articles, and studies written on China's strategic leadership and its revolution in military affairs. However, the existing library of Chinese research does not adequately address the combat leadership or political work system of the modern PLA. This work orients the reader to the all-encompassing influence the political work system has on the PLA's Revolutionary and Korean War soldiers. This paper also presents some of the changes and challenges modernization has created for the PLA. As the modern PLA officer leads soldiers in an adapting operational environment using the traditional political work system, potential negative impacts on combat effectiveness can be expected. In light of these possible impacts to the PLA's combat effectiveness, continued efforts are required to develop a stronger understanding of the PLA's political work system. I embarked on this project because it is important for U.S. and allied officers to better understand how PLA officers will lead soldiers into battle and sustain their will to fight.

I would like to acknowledge the patient mentorship and clarity offered by Dr. Edward C. O'Dowd throughout this project. A tremendous resource to the Marine Corps University and the Department of Defense, he was instrumental in simplifying the complex and broadening my understanding of the PLA. I would also like to thank Dr. Patrice Scanlon and her team for their expert tutelage, depth of knowledge, and hard work inspiring this Air Force operator and engineer to write. Lt. Col. Pete Yeager, USMC is a stellar example of the scholarly warrior, whose leadership has inspired me to think critically, ask deeper questions, and hopefully produce a document that adds value for the reader and inspires further research on the topic. Most importantly, I thank God for His blessings, the freedoms, and liberties we enjoy in the United States of America, and the love and support of my beautiful wife and children.

INTRODUCTION

China's lack of transparency is a primary contributor to the uncertainty surrounding the combat leadership capability of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In addition, China's lack of major conventional combat experience on the modern battlefield makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the PLA's combat leadership. China's last large-scale operation against a foreign military force was the 1979 conflict with Vietnam. The commanders and officers leading the PLA today are unlike their combat-hardened, revolutionary predecessors. Instead, today's Chinese officers generally are more educated, prosperous, technologically advanced, and untested in combat.

In spite of these changes within the officer corps, the PLA's combat leadership system appears to have remained largely static. In the context of this study, combat leadership is the art and science of influencing and directing soldiers to accomplish a mission under the stresses and challenges of war.¹ The basic elements of a combat leadership system are the leaders (e.g., cadre or officers), the soldiers, and the framework employed to govern the interaction between the two. The PLA's political work system provides the structure for its combat leadership capability. This study examines whether China's traditional leadership system will support and motivate the PLA's contemporary officer and his soldiers on future battlefields. The paper reviews the political work of the PLA, from its revolutionary origins to the present, and seeks to anticipate how modern Chinese officers will generate and preserve their soldiers' will to fight in future conflicts. As the combat leadership program for the PLA, the political work system aims to influence, develop, and inspire the body, mind, and heart of the PLA soldier to accomplish the will of the Party. Based on the changing dynamics of war and the shifting social characteristics

of the Chinese officer, the PLA's political work system must evolve or atrophy. Failure to evolve is likely to result in declining combat effectiveness.

THE CHINESE POLITICAL WORK SYSTEM

The Chinese Army displayed high combat morale during the Korean War. How did China's leader Mao Zedong marshal the enthusiasm that led over 400,000 Red Army soldiers to sacrifice their lives in Korea?² The answer to this question is rooted in the PLA's political work system. Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party) the political work system provided the framework for the PLA's combat leadership system. In spite of limitations, the political work system was generally effective in harnessing combat power and promoting harmony within the ranks. The political work system satisfied the soldier's physical needs, engaged his mind through an intensive indoctrination process, and influenced his heart by promoting strong comradely relations.

A Brief History of the People's Liberation Army

From the Red Army's genesis, the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary, Mao Zedong, relied on the principles of political work to win the bodies, hearts, and minds of the Chinese people and soldiers. Under his leadership, China developed a political work system that served to govern the interactions between the Party, officers, soldiers, and citizens. The political work system was the "only motivational program" for the Red Army and provided the structure for combat leaders to inspire their soldiers.³ Founded in response to the Nanchang Uprising of 1927, the Chinese Red Army (PLA) was a product of the CCP's violent break with the Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalist Party.⁴ The Civil War between the KMT and CCP continued to escalate until 1934 when the Nationalists nearly defeated the Red Army and drove them on the legendary 8,000-mile retreat referred to as the Long March.⁵ Many survivors of the Long March became the leaders of

the communist movement and the core of the Red Army's combat leadership. In response to the challenges they faced, Mao and his contemporaries garnered public support by organizing the revolutionary army into a "fighting force, a working force, and [a] political force."⁶

During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937 to 1945), communist military forces established the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army to fight the Japanese invasion.⁷ Employing mobile and guerrilla tactics, these two units conducted small-scale operations against Japanese and KMT forces. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Communist Party merged its military forces and renamed the multi-million man force the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Under the leadership of the CCP Chairman, Mao Zedong, the PLA had defeated the KMT and achieved victory by 1949.⁸

Fresh from their victory over the Nationalist armies, the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) found its security interests threatened by the United States (U.S.) involvement in Korea.⁹ The conflict in Korea demonstrated the Chinese leaders'/people's willingness to fight and sacrifice thousands of lives to defend their interests. Initially, American commanders grossly underestimated the numbers and intentions of the PLA, and the Chinese drove the American forces on the longest retreat in U.S. history.¹⁰ In spite of the impressive victories in the early months of combat, the Chinese eventually encountered mounting difficulties. Specifically, the PLA failed to destroy and evict the U.S. forces, eventually retreating north of the 38th Parallel during the spring of 1951.¹¹

The sustained U.N. momentum and mounting PLA combat losses in the later years of the Korean conflict eventually eroded the morale of many Chinese soldiers. According to Alexander George's book, *The Chinese Communist Army in Action*, when faced with large-scale defeat, soldiers often lost the high morale developed during their political indoctrination.¹² Under the

most severe conditions, the broken communist soldier freely questioned Party leadership and purpose of the war.¹³ The hardships of the war led to the capture and surrender of about 21,000 PLA soldiers.¹⁴ Yet, in spite of its tendency to collapse under the pressure of unrelenting and severe combat conditions, the political work system was largely successful in disciplining, motivating, and unifying the multi-million man army.

In the 1950s, the PLA had an estimated strength of 2,650,000 in five field armies and an additional several million-man militia.¹⁵ Many American soldiers fighting in Korea viewed this massive army as the "Chinese fighting hordes."¹⁶ However, the official U.S. Marine Corps history of the Korean War provides a more realistic assessment of the PLA combat forces:

Although the Chinese Reds were represented by a peasant army, it was also a first-rate army when judged by its own tactical and strategic standards....[W]hen fully committed, they did not relinquish the attack even when riddled with casualties. Other Chinese came forward to take their places, and the build-up continued until a penetration was made, usually on the front of one or two platoons....Each step of the assault was executed with practiced stealth and boldness, and the results of several such penetrations on a battalion front could be devastating.¹⁷

While the Chinese soldiers did not attack in hordes on a wide front, the PLA commanders did employ "human wave" tactics, with an apparent disregard for casualties.¹⁸ In spite of the extremely stressful operating conditions, the PLA's dispersed formations displayed high morale and a determination to fight. As casualties thinned the ranks, reinforcements poured in to maintain combat power and initiative. Coupled with the Korean terrain and their guerilla tactics, the Chinese soldier was a formidable enemy for the technologically superior U.S. led forces. The impressive level of morale, discipline, and control created by the communists relied on committed leaders, receptive followers, and the intensive political indoctrination employed by the PLA's political work system.¹⁹

The Components of the Political Work System

At its core, the CCP's political work system was a troop motivational program designed to enhance military effectiveness and to achieve decisive battlefield results, while attempting to mitigate war's death and destruction.²⁰ The PLA created a "politically conscious army," in which politics was at the heart and soul of every action.²¹ CCP leaders worked to build a modern army where perceived voluntary cooperation, grounded in the Chinese Communist ideology, replaced the repressive and dictatorial leadership of the warlords and the corrupt and oppressive political regime of the KMT leaders.²² More pervasive than its Soviet model, the Chinese political apparatus paralleled and straddled the military command structure from top to bottom. From the squad level up, Party members served in the most important leadership positions.²³

Composed of three interlocking structures, the PLA political work system consisted of the CCP committees, the political commissars, and the cadres. During the Korean War, these structures and the entire system rested on the foundation of a strong "3-by-3" organizational framework. Each element of the system worked to serve, defend, and support the Chinese Communist Party. Additionally, the CCP committee at each level generated the overarching political aims of the campaign and designed the information operations program. The committees also served as the ultimate source of authority and discipline in the PLA. The CCP committees controlled the "incentives and disincentives that impacted on a soldier's career and life."²⁴ In charge of the gun (i.e., military power) and purse (i.e., economic power), the Central Military Commission (CMC), at the top of the committee structure, was the central power broker for the PRC. Highly centralized under the leadership of Mao, the CMC held approval authority over promotions, transfers, funds, and even operational plans and orders.²⁵

Below the CMC and under the guidance of the General Political Department, a political commissar served in each company-sized or larger organization within the PLA and was responsible for the political work within his unit. He also shared joint responsibility for the unit at every level with the corresponding military commander. Additionally, the political commissar was primarily responsible for the service conditions, morale, combat motivation, and overall performance of the soldiers.²⁶ He directly supervised cadres and troops, exercising his authority without interference from the units' commander. Under this dual system of authority, the political commissars also had their own channel of command and communications.²⁷

The cadres, the third component of the political work system, were directly responsible for conveying the Party's political-military goals to the soldiers. Cadres held authority over other soldiers by virtue of their party membership and leadership position. The combat effectiveness of the unit depended directly on the cadres' ability to push the Party's line and motivational appeals to inspire the troops to accomplish the mission. With missionary-like zeal, the cadre aimed to convert the noncommunist soldiers by committing them to live by the communist ideals.²⁸ Ultimately, the political commissar and the cadre, "shaped the way the PLA fought and the effectiveness of the PLA forces on the battlefield."²⁹

By working together, the CCP committee, the political commissar, and the cadres aimed to inspire and empower the PLA's organizational foundation of "3-by-3" combat teams. Each combat squad consisted of several groups of these "3-by-3" teams, led whenever possible by a person considered by Party leadership to be reliable.³⁰ General James Van Fleet, who assumed command in April of 1951 of the U.S. Eighth Army in Korea, attributed the impressive combat qualities of the PLA in part to the influence of the "3-by-3" organizational framework. He explained the Chinese framework this way:

The Red Chinese Army is divided at the very bottom into units of three men, with each assigned to watch the others and aware that they in turn are watching him. Even when one of them goes to the latrine, the other two follow. No soldier dares fail to obey orders or even complain...the little teams of three, each man warily watching the others, begin the advance...Yet-although terribly alone in the fight despite the two men at his side, made even more lonely by the doubt whether the two are there to help him or to spy on him-the Red soldier moves ever forward.³¹

The effectiveness of these “3-by-3” teams supported the objectives of the political work system by promoting strong physical, mental, and emotional bonds for the Red soldier.

Physical Influence of the Political Work System

Mao Zedong championed a “man-over-weapons” philosophy. His emphasis on the human factor over advanced weaponry developed out of necessity as the sparsely resourced Chinese fought technologically advanced armies. Human capital was Mao’s most abundant resource, and China’s success was dependent on developing the soldier’s will to fight. With communism, the PLA also promised security from the corrupt leaders and all outside invaders. Thus, providing for the soldier’s temporal needs was the first step in gaining his allegiance and building his morale. For the PLA, strong morale was an effective counter-balance to the military and technological advantages enjoyed by its enemies.³² The Party officers also employed the political work system in order to improve the physical quality of life for many peasant soldiers.

Likewise, PLA leaders understood that control of a massive army was contingent on satisfying the temporal needs of their soldiers. The PLA paid its soldiers with an adequate daily living standard (food) and occasionally supplemented them with extra supplies. Many Chinese soldiers preferred the PLA to their other options because of the comfort they derived from a consistently full belly.³³ As a political work force and instrument of the Party, the PLA invested tremendous resources in promoting economic stability for the people and villages that displayed loyalty to

Chinese Cadre Under Mao

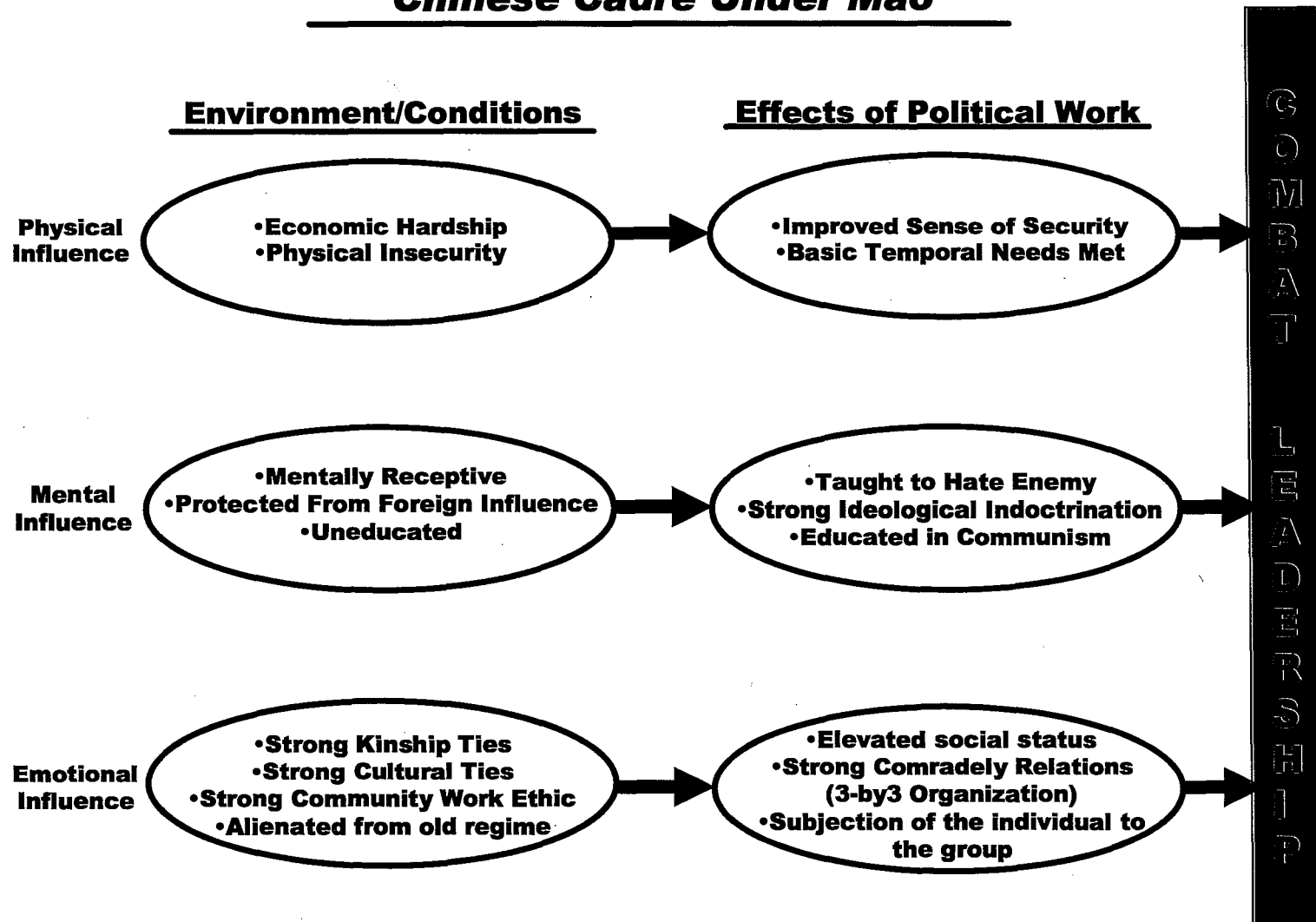


Figure 1 - Physical, Mental, and Emotional Influence of the Political Work System on the Chinese Cadre under Mao (Based on the environment and conditions during the Maoist era the traditional political work system promoted strong combat leadership).

the Party. For example, the PLA farmed lands, manufactured goods, and created businesses in an effort to supply its own needs and to win the public's support.

Mental Influence of the Political Work System

In its early years, the CCP built its strength by generating a crusade-like fervor against the Japanese invaders.³⁴ From the PLA's beginning, the political work system was instrumental in converting angry peasant guerrillas into devout communist soldiers, willing to sacrifice their lives for the Party. Mao benefited from a Chinese population that was largely uneducated and very impressionable. In fact, half of the PLA's cadre had not attended school beyond the tenth grade, and many soldiers and older cadre could not read or write.³⁵ The minds of China's people were fertile grounds for the communist ideology. To support the ideological conversion and engage the mental faculties of the soldier, the PLA leaders encouraged hatred of the enemy; an official PLA publication stated, "teach the soldiers to hate....[T]his kind of political education enables them to develop a deep hatred for their enemies!" This was one of the first steps in the political education of the PLA combat soldier.³⁶

The political work's induction process involved more than simple indoctrination and training for military duties. It also aimed to "alter important aspects of the individual's personality, attitudes, and behavior in order to make a good communist soldier out of him."³⁷ This assimilation process required a transformation of thought, along with a dedication to basic Chinese Communist standards: "anti-individualism, dedication of self to the interests of the people, and acceptance of the leadership of the Party."³⁸ The CCP believed that only political motives, understood, internalized, articulated, and closely related to day-to-day tasks provided a sound basis for good morale and combat motivation. The Chinese people were encouraged to replace philosophies and religions that might oppose communist principles with the Party's

political doctrines to inspire and direct action.³⁹ Therefore, in order to promote harmony and compliance, the CCP burned its communist slogans into the minds of the PLA soldiers.

Emotional Influence of the Political Work System

Through years of warfare, Chinese Communists learned that military discipline and performance peaked when based on voluntary motives and not from fear of punishment.⁴⁰ According to Mao, emotional strength, morale, and combat effectiveness depended on the self-discipline of the soldier and that the “discipline of compulsion [was] ineffective...[it] must be self-imposed.”⁴¹ Based on Mao’s philosophy, PLA leaders attempted to promote good discipline by organizing an egalitarian army. Party leaders attempted to reduce illiteracy and to equalize living conditions between cadre and ordinary soldiers in order to build trust and commitment within the ranks.⁴² Additionally, a common uniform coupled with the abolition of ranks and the custom of calling officers by their job title further helped to soften hierarchical stratification and improve comradely relations within units.⁴³

Beyond good discipline, the Chinese endeavored to “democratize respect and comradely relations between the officers and ordinary soldiers.”⁴⁴ The communist leadership encouraged popular participation in group decision-making efforts and in the administration of small military units. This practice elevated the soldier’s social status, self esteem, and magnified the Party’s influence and control over the soldier.⁴⁵ Mao championed a form of democracy within the ranks of the army when he stated:

Officers do not beat the men; officers and men receive equal treatment; soldiers are free to hold meetings and speak out; trivial formalities have been done away with; the accounts are open for all to inspect. The newly captured soldiers in particular feel that our army and the Guomindang [KMT] army are worlds apart...The very soldiers who had not courage in the White army yesterday are very brave in the Red army today; such is the effect of democracy...Democracy in our army is an important weapon for undermining the feudal mercenary army.⁴⁶

The esprit de corps and informal comradely ties nurtured by the political work system contributed significantly to the morale and combat performance of the PLA soldier. Drawing upon their combat experience, Chinese Communist leaders created and maintained small social groups (3-by-3 organization) as their revolutionary army increased in size and complexity. By encouraging comradely relations within the army, PLA leaders were promoting a characteristic of Chinese society in which "kinship and personal ties are important aspects of bureaucratic organization."⁴⁷ PLA leaders also "insisted that comradely ties among the men should have explicit political-ethical content."⁴⁸ A brotherhood developed within many of the small groups that won the hearts of soldiers, strengthened party loyalty, and boosted combat effectiveness.⁴⁹

The Traditional Political Work System in Summary

Mao's political work system created and galvanized a strong fighting force by capturing and fueling the soldier's body, mind, and heart. The PLA provided the peasant soldier a higher quality of life because it fed him, clothed him, and usually did not beat him. In addition, continuous and compulsory exposure to communist political indoctrination filled the soldier's mind and influenced his thought. Finally, the political work system linked the soldier's loyalty to the party through the integration of comradely relations. Although generally effective in harnessing peasant power and establishing a level of control over a massive army, there were limitations to the PLA's political work system, as manifested by the large number of Chinese soldiers that surrendered during the Korean War. The war demonstrated that the Chinese combat leadership system was not able to sustain the hardships and high sacrifices of a prolonged war on foreign soil.⁵⁰ The next section of the paper will address the political work system in the post-Korean War environment and the PLA's quest for modernization.

POST-KOREAN WAR PLA AND POLITICAL WORK

In response to the PLA's experience in the Korean War, Lieutenant General Sun Li-Jen, Taiwan's Chief Military Adviser, stated:

The Chinese Red Army will learn...that success in battle cannot be won by morale alone, but also requires material, tactical excellence of troops, high standards of professional competence and skill among officers, and adherence to sound strategic principles. The time will come when the ...communists will realize that ...'human sea' tactics are no match against modern science and organization...Until then the Chinese Red Army is, at best, an unbalanced force which will crack up the moment it is pitched against a modern army.⁵¹

Bloody and beaten the Chinese emerged from the Korean War with a similar recognition of their deficiencies in military technology, organization, and doctrine.⁵² Conscious of many of its weaknesses, the PLA leadership launched a modernization program and avoided large-scale or extended conflicts, preventing the serious "crack up" predicted by General Sun Li-Jen. Limited to internal riot control and border defense campaigns against the India, Soviet Union, and Vietnam, the PLA's post-Korean combat operations were restricted in scope and duration. In an effort to balance its force, China's government engaged in a modernization effort that has continued in varying degrees throughout the last half a century. As a result, the PLA has made numerous upgrades and improvements to its organization, training, and equipment in the last five decades.

The most visible and publicized improvements in the post-Korean PLA involve equipment; specifically investment in new weapons systems and advanced technologies that are high interest topics for many "PLA watchers." However, understanding the often overlooked yet notable changes in the PLA's organization and training is at least equally vital. These organizational and training changes include significant advancements in the professionalism and caliber of the PLA's officer corps and the formation of a non-commissioned officer corps. To a

lesser degree, the characteristics of the Chinese enlisted soldier have also changed. The transformation in the leaders and those they directly led influence China's combat leadership effectiveness. Yet, surprisingly, the political work system in which the officers and enlisted men operate appears virtually unchanged.

Initially, in the 1950s, the PLA attempted some modifications to the political work system by largely abandoning its revolutionary-egalitarian army and building a more professional fighting force. During this period, the Chinese Communists introduced a professional officer corps, conscription, and a system of ranks, distinctions, and privileges. In addition, the CCP attempted to relax the political controls within the armed services in order to advance technical expertise and military professionalism. However, the CCP later reintroduced the earlier system of tight political control after perceiving the consequences from a relaxed political posture as unfavorable for the Party, the army, and the people.⁵³ Therefore, in 1965, the Party increased its control over the army by dampening the emphasis on the system of ranks and distinctions that had been in effect for ten years.⁵⁴ With this regression, the political work system appeared remarkably similar to the system the Party had originally instituted.

Political Work During the Sino-Indian War

One critique of Mao's political work system is that the political commissar interferes with the duties of the commander, preventing or delaying decisive action and mission success in combat. However, the PLA's senior leaders disagree with this view.⁵⁵ They contend that the political work system is a "source of inspiration and esprit d'corps that helps the commander."⁵⁶ It is difficult to evaluate their assertion and the true effectiveness of the political work system, because of Chinese leaderships lack of transparency and the limited examples of the PLA in action. The crucible of warfare provides the most reliable laboratory for measuring the strengths

and weakness of the political work system. One example of the political work system applied in post-Korea combat is the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

During the Sino-Indian War, the Chinese demonstrated many strengths of the political work system in action. The campaign objectives established by the CCP were "to beat Indian troops soundly" and "to wipe out the invading Indian forces totally and rapidly."⁵⁷ The PLA accomplished the CCP's objectives by destroying the fighting strength of three Indian Army Brigades and seriously defeating five other Indian brigades. PLA records claim 4,897 Indian soldiers killed or wounded and 3,968 captured. In comparison, the PLA suffered only 722 killed in action, 1,697 wounded, and not a single PLA soldier captured.⁵⁸ The PLA accomplished this damage with the "equivalent of a reinforced corps (army), deployed and massed at the critical points along the border."⁵⁹

According to Dr. Larry M. Wortzel's examination of Sino-Indian War combat decorations, PLA leaders appear to lead from the front.⁶⁰ In addition, Party membership seems to encourage "leadership behaviors in other situations, and the responsibility that seems to flow from being part of an elite organization like the communist party, appears to make soldiers and leaders take greater risks."⁶¹ The award data also seems to "imply that political commissars, directors, and instructors... stay out of the way of the commander in combat" and are perhaps more of a "help than a hindrance."⁶²

Political Work During Modernization

Both Larry Wortzel and Alexander George have assessed the historic application of CCP's political work system as generally effective in generating and sustaining the Chinese soldier's will to fight. From the Chinese Revolution to the present, the PLA's leadership remains committed to the political work system and its function of motivating soldiers to do the will of

the Party. For example, under Mao, and in the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the army retained prominent political posts at all levels of the Chinese power structure. However, under the guidance of Deng Xiaoping, China's architect of economic reform, the PLA withdrew from involvement in local political affairs and reduced its central policy-making influence. At the same time, Deng's leadership strengthened the Party's control over the gun through various personnel changes and institutional controls.⁶³ With regard to institutional controls, under Deng, the political work system continued to provide the ideological indoctrination and structure demanded to maintain Party supremacy.⁶⁴ Similarly, the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown resulted in even more stringent political controls over the armed forces and a continued commitment to the political work system, in order to ensure the military's loyalty to the party.⁶⁵

In its role of inspiring officers and soldiers to serve the Party, the political work system remained largely static throughout the post-Korean War modernization. Ultimately, the controlling leadership system inhibited individualism, flexibility, innovation, creativity, but fostered conformity and risk aversion.⁶⁶ Because the political work system is foreign to, and often misunderstood by western militaries, many outside observers consider it an impediment to modernization and combat effectiveness.⁶⁷ In spite of these limitations, China's political work system apparently remains strong and promotes a sense of harmony between the Party, the people, and the PLA, while ensuring capable combat leadership.⁶⁸

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT AND EVOLVING PLA OFFICER

The PLA's general lack of military transparency increases U.S. uncertainty surrounding the modernization of China's military forces.⁶⁹ While quantitative estimates of China's military manpower, technological advancements, and orders of battle abound, assessments concerning

their morale, ingenuity, teamwork, and political loyalty are limited and difficult to confirm. It is also difficult to monitor any changes to the PLA's political work system and the officers that exercise power through it.⁷⁰ These critical intangibles mask the fighting spirit and strength of leadership that are essential for modern combat operations. In this arena, there is a scarcity of current, complete, and correct information. How modern PLA officers plan to lead their soldiers in combat and preserve their will to fight is not certain. It is also not certain if the PLA leadership recognizes weaknesses in the political work system, or if the system is evolving in any systematic fashion. What is certain is that the character of modern military operations and the character of the Chinese officer are changing.

Changing Character of War

According to Carl Von Clausewitz, the nature of war remains constant, but its form and character reflect the particular era and environment in which competitors wrestle for a political object in a struggle of wills.⁷¹ Today's changing character of war is influenced by globalization, dramatic technological advances, the access to information, the rise of non-state actors, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.⁷² The Chinese book, *Unrestricted Warfare*, calls this period "warfare in the age of globalization" and describes war's evolving environment.⁷³ The book further states, "Boundaries between soldiers and non-soldiers have now been broken down, and the chasm between warfare and non-warfare nearly filled up, globalization has made all the tough problems interconnected and interlocking."⁷⁴ Additionally, Beijing's "White Paper", *China's National Defense in 2006* states, "Revolution in military affairs is developing in depth worldwide [and] [m]ilitary competition based on informationization is intensifying."⁷⁵ The Chinese leadership is very aware of the dynamic character of warfare and they seek to influence the change instead of simply reacting to it.⁷⁶

“Informationalizing” the PLA

In a proactive manner, the Chinese are working to build a fully “informationalized” force, equipped with advanced technologies, innovative weaponry, and composed of highly educated and technically skilled men and women.⁷⁷ For China, “informationalization” is the use of the “latest technologies in command, intelligence, training, and weapon systems.”⁷⁸ Chinese leaders view the first twenty years of the 21st Century as a period of opportunity, with generally peaceful regional and international conditions supporting China’s rise economically, diplomatically, and militarily to the status of a great power.⁷⁹ Hu Jintao, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, leads China’s pursuit for a harmonious (i.e., stable and prosperous) society, regional hegemony, and global leadership. These goals are dependent on a PLA capable of high-tech, unrestricted, and asymmetric warfare.⁸⁰ The ambitions of Hu and his associates are dependent on the PLA transforming itself from a mechanized army to a digital army capable of winning “command of the sea and command of the air, and conducting strategic counter-strikes.”⁸¹

The PLA is working to build more than just “smart weapons;” it seeks laser, ultra-high frequency, ultrasonic-wave, stealth, mirror-beam, electromagnetic, plasma, robotic, and nanotechnology weapons.⁸² China’s “informationalization” also focuses on the “non-kinetic means of warfare and the increased role of economic, financial, information, legal, and psychological” instruments of power.⁸³ In fact, a PLA Academy of Military Science text notes “war is not only a military struggle, but also a comprehensive contest on fronts of politics, economy, diplomacy, and law.”⁸⁴ China is transforming its military from a massive conventional army designed for protracted wars of attrition on the homeland to a joint, high-tech force capable

of fighting and winning short-duration, high intensity conflicts wherever its interests may be threatened.⁸⁵ Critical to this military evolution are not only new weapons systems, equipment, technologies, doctrine, and strategy, but also changes in the PLA's human resources. For the PLA, investments in human capital are as valuable as technologically advanced weaponry.⁸⁶

Modernizing the Conscript Force and the NCO Corps

In spite of recent manpower reductions, China's military strength is still dependent on the sheer quantity of young men and women available for military operations, making it one of the largest armies in the world. According to China's 2006 "White Paper", the PLA has met its reduction goals and currently has 2.3 million troops.⁸⁷ This number does not include the 800,000 reserves, the People's Armed Police (PAP) force, and the people's militia.⁸⁸ Additionally, the PLA reduced its officer corps by 170,000, in order to build and professionalize its relatively young non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps.⁸⁹ NCOs fill 70,000 posts formerly held by officers, while contract civilians fill over 20,000 posts formerly held by NCOs.⁹⁰ Now, the PLA force structure consists of approximately one-third officers (i.e., 765,000), a third NCOs, and a third conscripts.⁹¹ The PLA claims "progress towards the goal of being proper in size, optimal in structure, streamlined in organization, swift and flexible in command, and powerful in fighting capacity."⁹²

The PLA has built its contemporary and streamlined force on the backs of its conscript force. The 18 to 22 year-old conscripts serve a two-year tour of duty, typically outside of their home region. Approximately 67% of the conscripts are from rural areas.⁹³ Although PLA leadership places emphasis on education, the core of the enlisted force continues to be poor, rural, young men with less than a high school education and a low degree of technical proficiency.⁹⁴ The PLA provides most conscripts with very limited leadership opportunities and

technical responsibilities. The conscript's typical duties consist of physical security, logistical support, and basic communications support.⁹⁵ In general, the PLA conscripts appear dedicated and proficient at basic small unit operations.⁹⁶ Additionally, the average enlisted soldier has strong stamina, endurance, and the ability to withstand adverse conditions.⁹⁷ Unlike the flexible guerilla volunteers of Mao's revolutionary army, contemporary PLA conscripts appear more reliant on strong centralized leadership and are not presently prepared to make independent judgments, act decisively, or fight adaptively on the modern battlefield.

After the second year of conscript service, a PLA soldier may compete for a selective NCO or officer position. To be selected, conscripts must pass an academy entrance examination, or be selected on merit in order to enter the NCO ranks. The number of NCO candidates attending academies and schools has doubled since the 1999 NCO system reforms. This is a direct result of the PLA's increased emphasis on the importance of NCO responsibilities, training, and education. The enhanced NCO education system aims to build a cadre of "strategic tacticians" who operate at the tactical level, but are aware of the strategic situation and their role within the national effort.⁹⁸ NCO responsibilities include training conscripts, filling key technical billets, and leading squads and platoons. Some NCO technical billets include electronic countermeasures, land-based radar, sonar technology, and signals communication.⁹⁹ Overall, the NCO corps is developing an increased capacity to lead, adapt, and make independent judgments. With these capacities comes an improved ability to think critically and act autonomously, which may present possible obstacles to the traditional political work system. As the PLA creates "informationized" NCOs with an expanded global awareness, it may simultaneously be reducing the effectiveness of its existing political work system.

Modernizing the Officer Corps

The PLA officer corps is further down the “informationization” path than the NCO corps. To date the PLA has successfully replaced the illiterate officers of the Maoist era with highly technical and professionally educated officers, many armed with graduate educations.¹⁰⁰ The PLA has virtually eliminated direct commissioning and secondary technical degree options for officer recruits. Officer recruits now come from the enlisted soldiers accepted into one of the military academies, or from civilian college students.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, PLA leaders and educators have improved the caliber, intensity, innovation, and availability of their professional military education (PME) programs.¹⁰² With over 67 military educational institutions, in 2006, the PLA command colleges instituted their first joint PME program.¹⁰³ Additionally, 112 civilian institutions of higher learning currently support defense-training programs.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the PLA has 41 educational institutions awarding doctor's degrees and 60 awarding master's degrees in these defense-training programs.¹⁰⁵ Unlike the past when graduate degrees were reserved for academy instructors and technical personnel, operational personnel are now being encouraged to pursue graduate educations. The PLA's PME reforms are raising the standards of academic institutions and recalibrating the curriculum to emphasize the demands of modern warfare.¹⁰⁶ One concern within the PLA is that military graduates from these high-level civilian programs lack operational experience, combat conditioning, and are ineffective in leading troops;¹⁰⁷ and, in response, professional military education institutions are restructuring to devote less time to theoretical pursuits and more time for practical application and operational tasks.¹⁰⁸ The PLA is also expanding its information network by building virtual laboratories, digital libraries, and on-line campuses to support distance learning and training.¹⁰⁹

Today's PLA officers are better educated and equipped, but less experienced in the art of war than their predecessors. Most modern PLA commanders have little or no actual combat experience. For example, China engaged in 16 combined military exercises with 11 different countries during the last five years.¹¹⁰ This lack of operational experience, along with a potential for over reliance on scientific combat models, may impair decision-making and assessment capabilities while increasing the potential for battlefield miscalculations.¹¹¹ Recognizing its lack of combat experience, the PLA leadership has enhanced joint training, along with a comprehensive integration of fighting systems and capabilities.¹¹² In addition, to advance its operational leadership capabilities, the PLA is making significant improvements in standardizing its training and evaluation processes.¹¹³

Certainly, the character and capabilities of the Chinese officer and NCO have transformed tremendously since the communists achieved control over China and the PLA demonstrated combat power in Korea. Furthermore, in spite of their inexperience on the battlefield, PLA officers expect to uphold the disciplined and courageous traditions of the combat hardened and heroic veterans of the PLA's glorious past.¹¹⁴ However, from all indications the PLA continues to employ Mao's political work system to physically, mentally, and emotionally inspire and motivate the modern Chinese officer and soldier.

POLITICAL WORK TODAY AND BEYOND

Given the continued development of a more independent and globally influenced NCO and officer corps, conflict is bound to arise between modern PLA leaders and the ideological correctness and political obedience of the political work system. The PLA continues to proclaim its commitment to the political work system, while emphasizing the need to improve the competence of political instructors and discipline within the force.¹¹⁵ Reportedly, the CCP

remains committed to elevating the overall performance of officers and soldiers by instilling the “ideals, beliefs, fighting spirit, and the socialist concept of honor and disgrace.”¹¹⁶ Can these well-informed and culturally more sophisticated officers use the historic Red Army narrative and political work system to inspire their soldiers to perform courageously on future battlefields? Until proven in combat, it is uncertain if the contemporary PLA officer sincerely subscribes to the Party’s doctrine and if he can effectively apply the traditional political work system to develop and inspire the body, mind, and heart of the PLA soldier.

Physical Influence of the Political Work System on Modern PLA Officers

China’s physical environment today is far different from the conditions Mao faced when he built the political work system. Repressed by foreign occupiers, internal corruption, and the oppressive control of the KMT, Mao’s China was willing to embrace the competing communist alternative. The Chinese people, predominantly peasants, were primed to accept an ideology that promised food on the table and an improved level of physical security. Mao’s political work system aimed to unite the Party, the army, and the people.

Today the educated and skilled Chinese officer expects a higher standard of living than his peasant predecessors did. Additionally, China’s physical and economic environment is more stable and secure than it was during the revolutionary period. China’s economic rise has presented competitive alternatives for China’s best and brightest students. In order to satisfy the demands of the modern PLA officer, the CCP has increased salaries and improved living conditions. The PLA’s focus on quality of life enhancements include more nutritious meals, new uniforms, new equipment, and better medical care. In addition, the PLA has improved its insurance, housing, and pension benefits for retired officers.¹¹⁷ Ironically, the Party derives its power and legitimacy, in part, from the strong Chinese economy. However, this same economic

Modern Chinese Officers

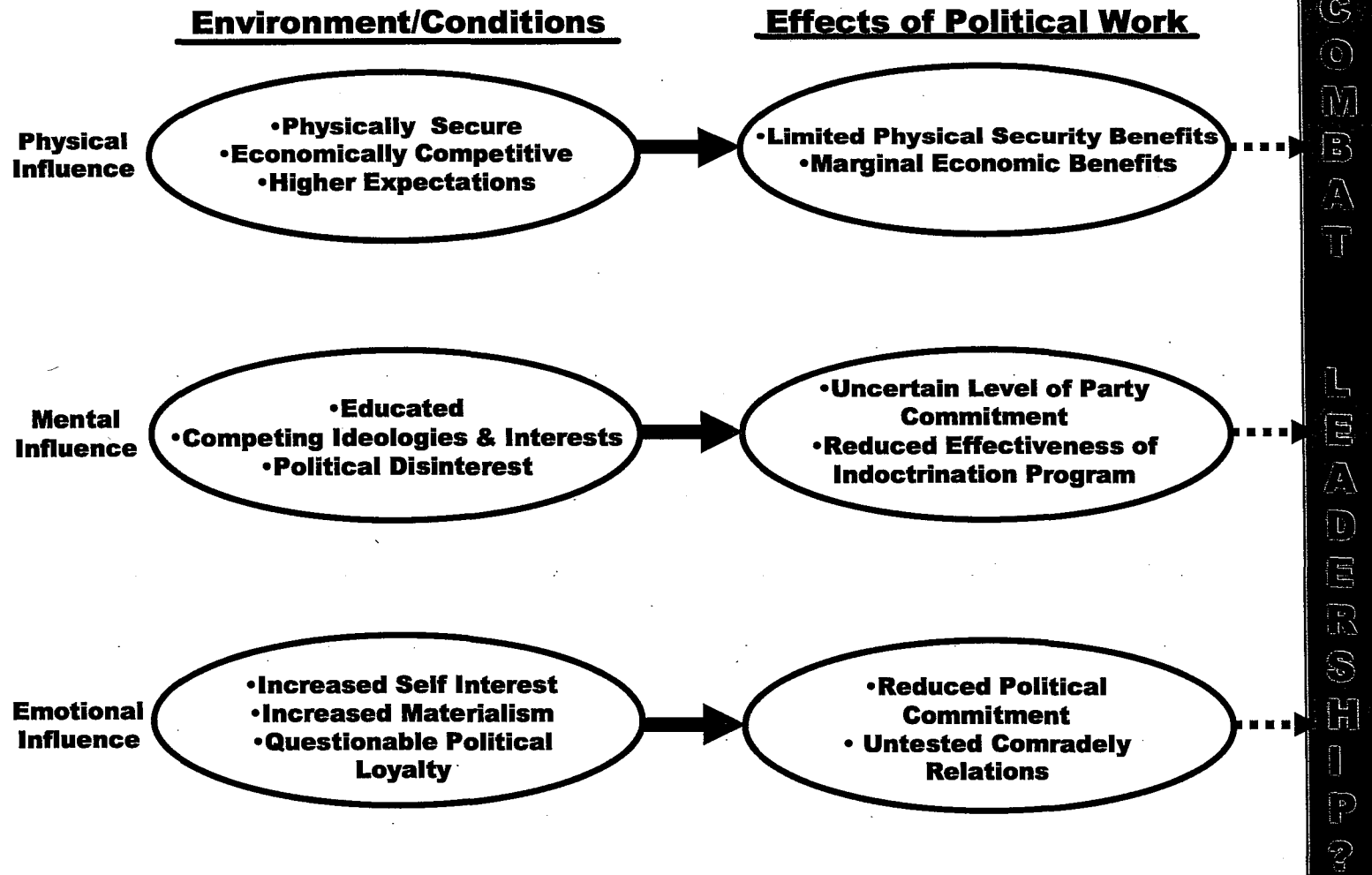


Figure 2 - Physical, Mental, and Emotional Influence of the Political Work System on the Modern Chinese Officers (Based on the current and future environment and conditions of the traditional political work system will result in questionable combat leadership).

prosperity exposes the Chinese people to a life style and information that challenge communist ideology and competes for Party allegiance. As China continues to open economically and socially, commitment to communist doctrine likely will decline.

For many of Mao's officers and soldiers, the PLA was the best way to satisfy their temporal needs. Today the PLA and its political work system do not provide the most attractive quality of life when compared to more lucrative business careers. Under the present and projected conditions, the Chinese Army must compete in the global marketplace to attract the most promising future leaders. The political work system no longer has the same level of physical influence and control over the lives of present and future officers as it enjoyed during the Maoist era.

Mental Influence of the Political Work System on Modern PLA Officers

Because the operating environment and characteristics of soldiers have changed, the crusade-like fervor the CCP originally generated against foreign invaders will be difficult to replicate. Political work is still an instrument of the Party that attempts to shape the minds of the modern PLA officers and the soldiers they lead, but the communist message now competes in an environment of information overload. Global media sources now increasingly challenge the CCP's political messages in spite of the Party's efforts to limit outside influences. Mao benefited from a Chinese population, officer corps, and conscripts that were largely uneducated and isolated from the rest of the world. However, with access to the internet, cell phones, and other media sources, information awareness is more abundant than ever in China. On the ideological battlefield, many ideas now challenge communist doctrine and the tenets of the political work system. Today's officers are highly educated, creative thinkers, exposed to various worldviews and cultures. These characteristics will make the modern PLA officer less

susceptible to the process of thinking employed by the traditional political work system.

Likewise, these characteristics will make the modern PLA non-commissioned officer able to think more critically and for himself. In spite of these changes in the PLA and in the world, China's leadership appears committed to the primacy of the Party and the indoctrination of its officers and soldiers through political work.

In order to control the gun, the CCP continues to fill the minds of its officers and soldiers with communist slogans and doctrine. However, today's PLA soldiers and officers do not have the same receptive minds Mao encountered; instead, they are filled with competing interests, philosophies, and ideas. An added difficulty the PLA is experiencing is the lack of political interest demonstrated by many new officer recruits.¹¹⁸ If the PLA holds to its original belief that only political motives provide the basis for good morale and combat motivation, while its officer corps demonstrates an increased apathy for the Party's politics and more interest in the merits of the profession of arms and national interests, then the political work system will need to evolve. It is unlikely that the traditional political work system can motivate and inspire a liberated officer corps to lead Chinese soldiers in becoming devout communists, willing to lay down their lives for the CCP. The narrative presented through the political work system is less likely to command influence over the minds of the PLA officers and soldiers than it did during the Maoist period.

Emotional Influence of the Political Work System on Modern PLA Officers

Mao's officers attempted to establish discipline, interdependence, and comradely relations with their soldiers. The CCP's political work system continues to encourage these characteristics, esprit de corps, and teamwork in order to build morale and combat performance. However, the rising generation of PLA officers reportedly has a weaker sense of group cohesion

and demonstrates an increased level of self-interest.¹¹⁹ These younger officers seem less effective in communicating and leading their fellow soldiers.¹²⁰ Additionally, the level of discipline in the junior officer corps comes into question based on an increased disregard for certain regulations and orders.¹²¹ With added economic prosperity and social freedom, an elevating tide of self-interest appears to be on rise within the PLA and in the whole of China. Loyalty to one's family and the PRC appear to be strong, but the conditions are ripening for an exponential increase in individual interests. Conversely, loyalty to the Communist Party is in an apparent decline.¹²² This self-interest is counter to communism and traditionally uncharacteristic of Chinese culture. Many competing and attractive alternatives compete with political loyalty for the heart of the modern PLA officer. As the influence of these alternatives expands, the effectiveness of the political work system will decrease. The PLA can expect increasing difficulty utilizing the traditional political work system to win over the body, mind, and heart of the modern officer.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese Communist Party conquered China through the power of the gun (i.e., the PLA). The PLA has historically confronted superior enemies, suffered horrendous casualties, experienced tactical-level defeats, but has triumphantly avoided strategic defeat and maintained control over one-fifth of the world's population.¹²³ For the PRC, the threat of the big stick, a strong military, is vital to maintaining stability and achieving its political objectives. The Chinese way of war seeks for the overwhelming advantage, is unrestrictive, and very much political. The PLA's ideal campaign is one in which the enemy collapses from economic, diplomatic, informational, or other measures that require little conventional military action.¹²⁴ The PLA is a political army, and it remains an instrument of the Party. The PLA's political work

system unites the officers and soldiers behind the political-military objective by developing, inspiring, and harmonizing their bodies, minds, and hearts to accomplish the will of the Party.

The PLA demonstrated strong combat leadership during the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, and Sino-Indian War. It also demonstrated effective leadership throughout the last half-century, as PLA officers molded millions of peasant soldiers into a courageous and committed army. The officers accomplished this feat through the employment of a uniquely powerful and comprehensive political work system. The system shaped group life, instilled communist ideals, unified the fighting force, and preserved Party supremacy.¹²⁵ However, the Korean War also demonstrated a key weakness in the Chinese political work system. When confronted with the overwhelming prospects of large-scale defeat, the PLA soldiers were quick to surrender and forsake their communist leaders.¹²⁶ In spite of this potential weakness, most Chinese leaders appear committed to the traditional political work system. As the character of war changes and the officers and NCOs who will lead the modern Chinese soldier into battle evolve, the PLA's political work system should also adapt.

Designed for a different time and type of warfare, the PLA's traditional combat leadership system seems unprepared to support effectively the leadership of Chinese soldiers on the modern battlefield. It is time for the political work system to change; however, it is uncertain whether the PLA's leadership recognizes the need for change and is willing to do anything about it. The ideology behind the contemporary political work system is likely to evolve from a focus on the principles of Mao's communist doctrine to strong sense of Chinese nationalism. In the end, the PLA cannot save a political work system that is out-of-sync with the demands of "informationized" soldiers and the dynamic economic and social environment of modern China. A political work system that constrains freedom of thought and imposes authoritative controls

will not perform as well as a system that develops not only discipline and teamwork, but also adaptability, innovation, creativity, and elevates the self-interest of the soldier. The most effective combat leadership system will motivate the soldier to not only serve and sacrifice for his country and his brothers in arms, but also inspire the soldier to achieve his full potential.

As China's leaders invest in a more professional, modern, "informationalized" PLA with an organization that in many ways models western nations, the pressures from within will demand the progressive reform of the political work system. Few studies have investigated the PLA's modern combat leadership system. As a result, "PLA watchers" should balance their attention to hardware (i.e., weapons systems) advances with the more important effort of understanding the software (i.e., people and leadership) changes the PLA is experiencing. A complete evaluation of the PLA's combat leadership system requires access to and the study of the actual materials, doctrine, and ideology the PLA political workers use to teach and inspire their soldiers. Commanders and soldiers win wars, not systems. Understanding the Chinese commander and how he will motivate, lead, and inspire his soldiers in combat is vital. To ignore the PLA's combat leadership system is perilous.

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